

The Porphyry Sarcophagi of Constantinople

For the first century or so of Constantinople's history, the emperors of the eastern empire chose to be interred within the city in large sarcophagi made of imperial porphyry, a stone of purple color and extreme rarity. Altogether, ten of these sarcophagi were made and used during Constantinople's Late Antiquity, most of which are still extant, scattered throughout modern Istanbul. The monumentality of their construction and the fame of those persons once interred inside of them have generated considerable interest in these tombs throughout the centuries. A handful of chronicles survive from Antiquity and the Middle Ages that detail and discuss them, and numerous travelers to Istanbul recorded their encounters with the monuments (Grierson 1962).

Alas, a lack of dedicatory inscriptions on the stone, alongside the ravages of conquest, have made identifying the former occupants of these tombs difficult. The surviving literary sources are of little help, but do provide enough information that tentative attempts at attestations, often of varying credibility and in conflict with one another, were made in the mid 20th century (Vasiliev 1948). Later, new evidence was brought to light that allowed firmer attestations for a small handful of the tombs, but no more beyond this (Mango 1962).

A seemingly intractable problem remained in that more than half of the tombs are so-called "cross-box" tombs, which are nearly identical in appearance to one another, which problematizes any attestations. A key insight was made when it was noticed that the particularities of their construction and dimensions allowed for the positing of a likely order of construction (Austay-Effenberger and Effenberger, 2006). With this advancement, attestations for all of the tombs were within reach.

This left the problem of what to do with the remaining tombs, which, unlike the cross-box tombs, are all idiosyncratic in their construction and more able to be firmly identified. Austay-Effenberger and Effenberger assigned occupants to all of these tombs, but since the publishing of their monograph, different historians have made individually convincing arguments as to the occupant of some tombs (e.g.: Bardill, 2012). As such, it is almost certain that Austay-Effenberger and Effenberger, the last scholars to make a complete series of attestations, are wrong in several of their assignments. However, the arguments made by other historians have all been about one or two tombs and have not employed their relevant insights in order to make a complete system of attestations.

This paper does just that. Along with a thorough discussion of the history of the tombs and their descriptions and interpretations in the scholarship, this paper provides a complete series of attestations for the known porphyry tombs. In order to produce this system, this paper synthesizes the various disconnected attestations made by other historians and uses their insights in order to help identify some of the less-discussed tombs. This system includes the proffering of a novel attestation for one of the most heavily-disputed tombs by drawing attention to under-appreciated particularities of terminology in the primary sources. Altogether, this effort produces what represents the most current and complete system of attestations in the literature.

Selected Sources

Austay-Effenberger, Neslihan, and Arne Effenberger. *Die Porphysarkophage Der Oströmischen Kaiser*. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2006.

Bardill, Jonathan. *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2012

Grierson, Phillip, Cyril Mango, and Ihor Sevcenko. "The Tombs and Orbits of the Byzantine Emperors (337-1042)." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16 (1962).

Mango, Cyril. "Three Imperial Byzantine Sarcophagi Discovered in 1750." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16 (1962).

Vasiliev, A. A. "Imperial Porphyry Sarcophagi in Constantinople ". *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 4 (1948).